

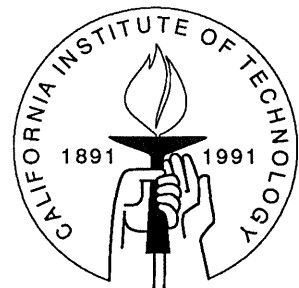
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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA 91125

The Plot

J. Kent Clark



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Abstract

The following essay on the Popish Plot is chapter nine of my biography of Thomas, 5th Baron, 1st Earl, and 1st Marquess of Wharton; and perhaps it is the only chapter in the history of biography that barely mentions the name of the protagonist. This odd state of affairs arises because neither the political career of Thomas Wharton, who later became de facto prince of the Whigs, nor the English Revolution, which he vigorously supported, can be understood without considerable background knowledge of the famous Plot. The plot crisis, with its bizarre mixture of lies and truths, conditioned politics for years to come.

If I could have assigned my readers to put down my biography after chapter eight and go read John Phillips Kenyon's excellent book *The Popish Plot* (London, New York, 1972), I might have skipped this chapter entirely. Certainly I would never have written forty-odd pages on the subject (a total that will have to be reduced by at least half before the biography is published). On the other hand, I like to think that my treatment of the crisis, as I try to explain to myself and my contemporaries the hysterias of another age, has a certain immediacy for people who have cut their teeth on conspiracy theories, who have dealt with Fascist and Red Menaces, and who have learned to distrust their own governments and more especially their own secret police. I like to think too that the traumas of the past sixty years allow me and my readers to understand the actors in the Plot drama in a way that would have been difficult in a less threatened era. Finally, I have found the story of the Plot fascinating simply as a story. The world of Oates, Tonge, La Chaise, Scroggs, Charles, James, Coleman, Ruvigny, Danby, and Godfrey is at least as mad as our own; and if I seem to be carried away in tracing the step-by-step development of a national nervous breakdown, I hope the reader will empathize. We will sober up later.

The Plot

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The task of making the passions of one age understandable to another age is always formidable. Perhaps, like the description of old love affairs, it should be undertaken only by poets. Nowhere is this task more difficult than in the attempt to convey the emotional content of the Popish Plot three hundred years after the event. Here the fact that the words have remained unchanged constitutes a positive barrier to understanding. The intervening history has bleached and abraded the meanings of such terms as *Catholic*, *Protestant*, *Jesuit*, *Presbyterian*, and *Anglican* until they have essentially lost their function as battle flags and virtually all of their menace. Years of mutual toleration, along with the general secularization of society, have made Catholics and Protestants, except perhaps in Ireland, regard each other as amiable and only slightly deluded fellow citizens. In the 1990s, the very term *popish* seems quaint and slightly ridiculous, and a popish plot could not refer to anything more serious than a conspiracy against birth-control devices or a projected blockade of an abortion clinic.

This does not mean, of course, that hysteria and bigotry have vanished from contemporary culture; it means only that they have changed forms and that in general they are reserved for secular political crises. To understand viscerally, then, how an imaginary Catholic plot to assassinate Charles II could convulse England—how the paranoia of Israel Tonge and the elaborate lies of Titus Oates could produce judicial murders and transform English politics—we must add some recent analogies to the actual background of 1678.¹

The fundamental fact to be remembered about the Popish Menace in the seventeenth century is that like the Red Menace of a later age it was perceived as a foreign, international threat, as well as a domestic conspiracy—a design to overthrow the government by violence. From the time that Elizabeth I firmly established herself in power (after Queen Mary I had tried to re-Catholicize England with firebrands and faggots, and after an abortive rebellion by Northern nobles had been put down), there was little chance that any purely domestic uprising would restore the medieval order. There was sometimes

¹The best study, by many orders of magnitude, of the famous “Plot,” is that of John Phillips Kenyon: *The Popish Plot* (London, New York, 1972). I have listed it in my short-title bibliography and used it extensively in my accounts of the “Exclusionist” period.

a serious chance, however, that an overwhelming foreign power, with the aid of English plotters, might succeed. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the paramount danger was from ultra-Catholic Spain—then the dominant military regime in Europe. This danger was intensified by the fact that in 1570 the Pope had formally deposed Elizabeth and absolved her Catholic subjects from their allegiance to the Crown. Philip II, with his Invincible Armada and his plan for invading England, intended not only to crush a rival nation but also to remove a heretical Queen and re-establish the true faith.

Compared with such massive threats, the machinations of later, home-grown fanatics like Guy Fawkes, Robert Catesby, and their associates in the famous Gunpowder Plot seemed more mad than practical—especially as England became more and more solidly Protestant.² Without the backing of a sizeable foreign army, a knot of assassins was unlikely to accomplish anything but carnage. Because of the international connection, it should be added, and because extreme Catholics refused to swear allegiance to a heretical ruler, priests were classed as agents of a foreign government. Whereas Anglican martyrs had been burned as heretics, Catholic martyrs were hanged, drawn and quartered as traitors.

As Spanish power waned and as the great Catholic monarchies, France, Spain, and Austria, became increasingly involved in fighting each other, the danger of foreign intervention in England decreased. Bloody Mary, fires, martyrs, Spanish galleons, Philip II, and sanguinary plots became a memory, an old horror story; and although popery had become inextricably linked in English minds with flames and violence, the anxieties abated. By the time Milton wrote “Lycidas,” the great international menace had dwindled from a fearsome Armada to a wolf with “privy paw”—from a Wehrmacht or Red Army to a KGB, from the Duke of Parma’s expeditionary force to a crafty band of Jesuits. Temperatures were further reduced by the success of Gustavus Adolphus and his Protestant confederates against the Austrian Emperor in Germany.

It was still dangerous for English politicians to be thought soft on Catholicism, as Charles I learned to his cost, and there was a flare-up of anti-popish hysteria with the Irish rebellion of 1641. In general, however, during the middle of the seventeenth century, the peril for the Anglican Church and the traditional monarchy came from Puritan reformers, not from Catholic reactionaries. New presbyters and Cromwellian colonels replaced old priests and Catholic kings atop the list of Anglican enemies. At the time of the Restoration, then, though anti-popish penal laws remained on English books and priests were still officially banned from England as foreign agents, the laws were routinely evaded, indigenous Catholics were in little danger of prosecution, and Catholic peers sat in the newly restored House of Lords. In the wave of pro-monarchical enthusiasm, it was remembered that Catholics had fought on the side of Charles I and that Father

²On 1 Nov. 1678, after the delations of Oates, the Commons feared another gunpowder plot and appointed a committee to search the houses near Parliament. No explosives were discovered, but the Clerk of the Works reported next day that the roof over the Commons was badly in need of repair—liable, in fact, to collapse in a storm. The Commons moved to the Court of Requests while repairs were effected. *HCJ*, ix, 530-31.

John Huddleston, a Catholic priest, had helped the young Charles II to escape after the disastrous battle of Worcester.

This state of de facto toleration was changed, as we have seen, by two ominous developments, one foreign and one domestic. On the Continent, France replaced Spain as the dominant military force. A new and efficient royal dictatorship, that is to say, replaced a disorganized and now moribund empire; the Most Christian King replaced His Catholic Majesty as a chronic threat to the balance of power. By 1672 there was once again an obvious foreign danger. And at home in England, the heir apparent to the throne turned Catholic.

Either of these two circumstances was enough to alarm English Protestants, who then constituted about ninety-five percent of the population. Taken together, they were explosive. We might gain some faint idea of the fears involved by imagining a modern parallel. If the presidency of the United States were hereditary and included (besides control of the armed forces) the power of dissolving Congress at will, if the heir apparent was a recent and doctrinaire convert to Communism, if the Cold War was at its height and the Red Army at full strength, and if both the president and his heir were rightly suspected of taking money from the Kremlin, American nerves might be stretched as tautly as those of their English predecessors. And if some ex-defector after a tour of duty with the KGB should return with a long, circumstantial account of a Communist plot to assassinate the president and seize the government, American hysteria might match that which greeted the revelations of Titus Oates in the autumn of 1678. If, in addition, there were no newspapers in the country and no reporters to conduct independent investigations (if news travelled only by word of mouth or by letters), and if, finally, the magistrate who had received the first sworn, written statement of the sensational charges should be found mysteriously murdered, the public fury and frustration would be incandescent. No foreign agent or local collaborator named in the accusations or swept up in the subsequent probes could expect a trial much more dispassionate than those once conducted by Lord Chief Justice Sir William Scroggs. And any American Communist leader, whether named in the charges or not, would be well advised to leave the country—if he could get away.

To return from modern analogies to the world of the Whartons, we may use 13 August 1678 as the date when the match devised by Titus Oates was touched to the train of explosives provided by the political crisis. It was in the morning of that day that one Christopher Kirkby, acting on behalf of Dr. Israel Tonge, warned Charles II that his life was in danger,³ and it was in the evening of that day that Charles gave Kirkby and Tonge a private interview at Whitehall and heard from Tonge the outline of a Jesuit assassination plot.

Israel Tonge, an Anglican clergyman who held a doctorate in divinity from Oxford,

³Kirkby knew Charles because of their mutual interest in “chemistry”; that is to say, alchemy, pharmacology, and chemistry. Charles had a “chemical” laboratory in Whitehall under the direction of Sir Thomas Williams. (See *Goodwin Wharton*, pp. 24, 333-34). It was easy, therefore, for Kirkby to meet Charles on the Whitehall stairs and convey his warning.

had long been obsessed with the danger from Jesuits,⁴ and he had been convinced that they or their abettors were responsible for the Great Fire of London. Recently he had become re-acquainted with a young man, Titus Oates, who actually knew Jesuits. The twenty-nine year old Oates, once an Anglican cleric,⁵ had spent more than a year as a recruit in the Jesuit organization in France, Spain, and England; and he had sometimes run errands for Jesuit officials. Oates reported to a thrilled and horrified Tonge that the Jesuits were even more dangerous than Tonge had supposed. Besides burning London, as Tonge had suspected, they had devised a series of plans to assassinate Charles II and to “take off” a few other prominent anti-Catholics, including Tonge himself. They also planned to stir up insurrections in all parts of the British Isles. For Tonge’s benefit, Oates had put his discoveries in writing—in a detailed narrative of forty-three numbered paragraphs.⁶ It was this long account (recopied in Tonge’s own handwriting to conceal Oates’s identity) that Tonge brought to Whitehall and his interview with Charles.

Oates’s strange story had been made plausible by its shower of details and its matter-of-fact tone. Anything but a neat, carefully crafted account of a conspiracy, it was a series, roughly chronological, of what purported to be first-hand observations and conversations involving Jesuits; it included episodes both trivial and important, and the author seemed to have no clear idea of which was which. The document was time-consuming to read and difficult to condense. When Tonge brought it to Charles, the King did not try to study the handwritten pages in detail. Like any busy executive, he had Tonge summarize the charges and read a few crucial passages. Then, after asking some questions about the alleged plot and the writer (whose identity Tonge concealed, as he had promised), Charles ended the interview. The next morning, before leaving for Windsor, he handed the papers over to a trusted attendant and ordered them to be passed on to Danby for evaluation.

Besides the apparent artlessness of the narrative, there were other reasons why Charles could not dismiss the conspiracy story out of hand. The account was liberally sprinkled with verifiable facts, with names and aliases of real people. There was enough accu-

⁴Israel (or Ezerel) Tonge had begun lambasting the Jesuits in print in 1670, when he published *The Jesuit Morals. Collected by a Doctor of the College of Sorbon* [Nicolas Perrault] . . . and exactly translated into English [by Israel Tonge]. The tone of Tonge’s later attacks can be gathered by some of their titles: *Jesuitical Aphorismes*. . . (London, 1679); *The New Design of the Papists Detected*. . . (London, 1679); *Jesuits Assassins: Or The Popish Plot Further Declared, and demonstrated in their Murderous Practices and Principles* (London, 1680).

⁵Oates had begun life as an Anabaptist. His father, Samuel Oates, an Anabaptist preacher, had been a chaplain in Cromwell’s army. The senior Oates conformed to the Established Church at the Restoration (when young Titus was eleven) and secured the living of All Saints at Hastings. Titus himself attended Cambridge, from which he left without receiving a degree. He was able to take holy orders, nevertheless, and held a few minor church positions before he defected to the Jesuits. Oates’s early sectarian background gave a curious flavor to some of his “revelations.”

⁶The narrative, recast as sworn testimony and enlarged to eighty-one numbered paragraphs, is printed in *HLJ*, xiii, 313-30, and *State Trials*, vi, 1430-71. It also appears in Titus Oates, *A True Narrative of the Horrid Plot and Conspiracy of the Popish Party, against the Life of His Sacred Majesty, the Government, and the Protestant Religion*. . . (London, 1679) and [Titus Oates], *The Discovery of the Popish Plot, being the several Examinations of Titus Oates D. D.* . . (London, 1679). A MS copy survives in Rawlinson D. 720, fols. 172-91. In referring to passages in the narrative, I cite *HLJ*.

rate information to enable a government that was so inclined, even without the aid of anything resembling a modern police force, to roll up the Jesuit apparatus in England. There was enough information, in fact (though Oates had not said so), to suggest culpable negligence on the part of the present government. The odd tale warranted further examination, therefore, if only to compare its allegations with the facts in the possession of the authorities. Even misinformation and current rumors were valuable to Crown officers.

In another way, too, the story that Tonge brought the King had political value. Oates had cast Charles as a Protestant hero—somewhat besmirched, to be sure, but a hero nevertheless. Charles appeared as the prime enemy of the Jesuits and England's bulwark against a flood of popery. Whereas Andrew Marvell had pictured Charles as at least a passive co-conspirator in the movement toward popery and arbitrary power, Oates filled his pages with virulent Jesuit denunciations of the King—the “Black Bastard”⁷ who stood between the Jesuit order and power. Oates was also careful to exculpate the Duke of York. Far from being a plotter against his brother, whom he loved, James in the Oates version was another problem for the conspirators. He would inherit the crown, naturally, but if he showed the slightest reluctance to follow Jesuit orders and force popery upon England, he would be assassinated too.⁸ This whitewashing of the King and the Duke would soon become an embarrassment to Whig propagandists and to Oates himself. In the beginning, however, it was something like a guarantee of good faith. Shaftesbury and his friends were highly unlikely to write such stuff.⁹

Beyond these obvious considerations, Charles had one more reason for sending along the document for further analysis. Monarchs were always well advised to take assassination plots seriously, even when they were revealed by dotty old clergymen who would not name their informants. Among all the allegations that had been thrown into the Oates narrative, like a handful of firecrackers, there might be some worth investigating. Charles could not really afford to overlook the possibility that some Catholic zealot, or combination of zealots, might try to get him out of the way—that some latter-day Babingtons¹⁰ would decide to hurry the popish succession along.

With the conversion of James to Catholicism the situation had reverted to that of the days when Mary, Queen of Scots, was a possible successor to Elizabeth and hence a strong incitement to conspiracies among popish fanatics. Now, just as loyal Protestants, though duty bound to pray for James as a member of the royal family, could hardly

⁷*HLJ*, xiii, 315. Oates's narrative method allowed him to call Charles names while picturing him as essential to Protestant safety.

⁸Interestingly enough, Oates also exculpated the English secular clergy from any involvement in assassination plots. Ordinary priests, Oates said, were “inclined to live in Peace and Obedience to their Prince” (*HLJ*, xiii, 316). All the danger came from the regular orders—the Jesuits, Dominicans, Benedictines, and Carmelites—and principally from the Jesuits, who were the most fanatical. Thomas Pickering, one of the men assigned to shoot Charles in the Oates account, was a Benedictine.

⁹Though Shaftesbury later made great political capital from the Plot, he had nothing to do with Oates's original narrative. For an excellent summary of Shaftesbury's role in the melee that followed the Oates “revelations,” see *Shaftesbury*, pp. 453–62.

¹⁰Anthony Babington was one of the leaders of a plot against Elizabeth I in 1586.

help hoping that he would die before his brother Charles, so loyal Catholics, a repressed minority, could hardly help hoping the opposite. Meanwhile, an international society owing no loyalty to the King and dedicated to the spread of the Catholic faith might be tempted to do something more than hope. Though Charles could be perfectly sure of James's innocence, he could not be *perfectly* sure of James's Jesuit friends. It seemed only sensible, then, to run at least a preliminary check before dismissing the matter and before warning James that his friends were under investigation.

If Charles had taken time to study Oates's account in detail, he might have concluded that the Jesuits, though elaborate and tireless plotters, were hopelessly inept as murderers. The first two assassins assigned to what should have been a relatively simple task¹¹ had failed—one because he became too “faint hearted”¹² to kill the King (though promised £1,500 for the assassination) and the other because he had forgotten to check the flint in his pistol, which turned out to be loose when he was ready to shoot Charles in St. James's Park. Neither attempt had been detected, and both men (John Grove and Thomas Pickering) had been reassigned to complete their task. Their superiors, meanwhile, to make doubly and triply sure, had raised large sums to have the King stabbed or poisoned. Most recently they had sought to bribe Sir George Wakeman, the Queen's Catholic physician, to do the poisoning. After more than a year of plots, nevertheless, and after a full-scale Jesuit conference on the subject, Charles had remained healthy and unaware that he was threatened.

The Jesuits were similarly inept, in Oates's original account, in providing suitable military backup for their plot. Oates knew something about the Jesuit organization but very little about *realpolitik*. He did not seem to understand that if he was right about James's patriotism and if James was left in command of the army and the militia (and if he took reasonable care to protect himself), the assassination of Charles would succeed only in getting Catholic priests hanged from trees. Oates's vague accounts of projected risings in Scotland and Ireland, perhaps with French help,¹³ did not provide an adequate threat. To make the plot ultimately credible, he needed to supply the names of the military and political leaders,¹⁴ and he needed to produce foreign invasion forces capable of seizing and holding power.

About one feature of Oates's narrative, Charles knew more than Oates himself, and what he knew was a dangerous embarrassment to the government. Though wrong about the precise date and place, Oates had been right about a Jesuit “consult” in England.

¹¹It is worth noting that if Kirkby had been a determined assassin, he could have stabbed Charles on the steps of Whitehall.

¹²*HLJ*, xiii, 313.

¹³The Irish, Oates said, would be ready with 25,000 men if the French King wished to land soldiers in Ireland (*HLJ*, xiii, 317); but he did not state categorically that Louis actually intended to invade. Tonge, perhaps aware of the weakness of Oates's account, improved the story when he talked with the King. He told Charles that the assassination scheme was a prelude to a French invasion. With Charles “knocked in the head” and with England, Ireland, and Scotland in confusion, James could not defend the kingdom against the French (Kenyon, p. 52).

¹⁴In his original story, Oates said that the Pope had issued commissions to Irish plotters (*HLJ*, xiii, 317), but he did not name the plotters or provide English counterparts.

Oates had placed it at the Whitehorse Tavern in the Strand and given the date as early May.¹⁵ After the general session attended by about fifty men, he alleged, the members had formed a number of small groups and taken up quarters in the area. In carrying messages back and forth between such groups, he said, he had picked up information about the plot.

Actually, the Jesuit meeting had been held on 24 April, it consisted of forty members of the order, and it had not taken place in the Whitehorse Tavern but in St. James's Palace, the residence of the Duke of York.¹⁶ This last fact Charles and James felt obliged to conceal at all costs (much as a president of the United States might wish to conceal a meeting of Soviet agents in the White House), and their need for secrecy¹⁷ would later prove a severe handicap to Jesuit defendants, who could not divulge the truth or call James to witness that Oates was lying about the place and purpose of the "consult." They could not convince prejudiced juries that Oates's sinister gathering (designed, Oates said, to plot the King's murder) was simply a regular triennial meeting of the Jesuit order or that Oates was attending the Jesuit seminary at St. Omers, in France, when he said he was in London carrying incriminating messages between non-existent subgroups.

The second crucial date in the developing drama of the Plot was 6 September 1678. On that day Titus Oates took an expanded version of his narrative to Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, a noted London Justice of the Peace, and swore to the truth of his story. In the interval between 12 August and the interview with Godfrey, the fuse lit by Oates and Tonge had sputtered and threatened to go out. Danby had interviewed Tonge and Kirkby and launched an investigation of Oates's charges; he had detailed men to find

¹⁵The date 24 April 1678 (the actual date of the "consult") appears in Oates's narrative, but there it seems to be the date on which the Jesuits from St. Omers and other Continental sites left to attend the London conference. The meeting at the Whitehorse Tavern, in the Oates version, was "held in the month of May." *HLJ*, xiii, 317. Oates was wrong about the place and the exact time of the meeting because he was in St. Omers while it was going on.

¹⁶On 8 May 1685, after James had become King, he revealed this fact to Sir John Reresby. Speaking of Oates's imaginary meeting at the Whitehorse Tavern, "the King [James] said indeed ther was a meeting of the Jesuists [sic] on that day [24 April 1678], which all the schollars of St. Omers knew was to be, but it was well Doctor Oats knew no better where it was, for it was then in St. James his [St. James's], wher the said King then dwelt; for, said the King, if that had been understood by Oats, he would have made ill worke for me." *Memoirs of Sir John Reresby*, ed. Andrew Browning (Glasgow, 1936), p. 365. The Jesuit John Warner (later chaplain to James) says that when Charles II examined Oates before the Privy Council [on 29 Sept. 1678] he knew that Oates was lying about the Jesuit assembly at the Tavern, "since he was aware that they had forgathered in the palace belonging to the Duke of York" [St. James's]. [John Warner], *The History of English Persecution of Catholics and the Presbyterian Plot*, ed. T. A. Birrell, tr. John Bligh (London, 1953), p. 199. Of course, Warner adds, Charles could not reveal this secret knowledge to his Protestant Council.

¹⁷The danger to the political future of the Duke posed by the secret meeting at St. James's prompted Sir John Pollock to construct an elaborate theory on the murder of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey. Godfrey, says Pollock, inadvertently learned about location of the meeting from his friend Edward Coleman, Catholic ex-secretary of the Duke, and the Jesuits were forced to kill him to shut his mouth. The Jesuits reasoned that if the secret leaked out James would be excluded from the throne, if not beheaded, and that they would never come to power in England. Sir John Pollock, *The Popish Plot*, 149-166. It should be added in passing that James's decision to host a Jesuit conference at the palace was something less than inspired.

and shadow some of the men Oates had named, and he set up a watch at the Post Office to intercept suspicious letters. Though Oates, who was busy improving and lengthening his story, had supplied Tonge with additional details, Danby could find no independent corroboration. He found instead something that made him suspect the whole story to be a malicious fabrication. At Windsor, where the King and Duke of York had gone after the King's interview with Tonge, the Duke's Jesuit confessor Francis Bedingfield (whose name, misspelled *Bennifield*, had appeared in the narrative) received through the mail five strange and "wildly incriminating" letters.¹⁸ Four of these bore the signatures of clerical plotters named in the Oates document and one purported to be from an Irish physician named Fogarty,¹⁹ but it seemed obvious to Bedingfield, who knew the Jesuit correspondents, that both the letters and the signatures were crude forgeries. Though neither he nor James, to whom he went immediately with the disturbing letters, had heard anything about the Oates story, both suspected some kind of trap; and when Danby and Charles learned of the forgeries, they could readily guess what the trap was. The letters had been written, they reasoned, to corroborate Tonge's story and to further incriminate Bedingfield and his alleged correspondents. The forgers, overestimating the efficiency of Danby's agents, had expected the letters to be intercepted at the Windsor posthouse.²⁰

The conspiracy story was temporarily damaged by the forgeries. Charles was ready to dismiss the whole plot as a hoax, and Danby suspected, in addition, that Tonge had invented the tale himself. Both men suspected that Tonge was more than a little mad. The narrative, after all, was in his handwriting, and he had not produced the supposed author. But the fiasco evoked its own train of consequences. For one thing, it showed Tonge that he was alone and dangerously exposed. If Oates was "made away" by the Jesuits or if he simply disappeared, as he frequently did, and if his charges were judged false and malicious, Tonge was in serious trouble. As a clergyman, he might escape with his ears and he might even avoid the pillory. He could not escape ridicule, however, or the charge (in Burnet's phrase) that he had lost "what little sense he had."²¹ It was essential, then, that he should get a sworn statement from Oates about the authorship of the narrative, as well as its truth. It may have occurred to Tonge also that it would be wise to put a copy of the all-important document in official hands more reliable than those of the King and the Lord Treasurer, who might find political reasons to smother the Plot. In any case, Tonge found Oates and succeeded in persuading him to appear, with his fateful narrative, before Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey.

Another consequence of the forgery episode was that it alarmed and angered James. There were obviously some defamatory and dangerous anti-Catholic charges circulating about, and he wanted the authors exposed and punished. He did not understand that the last thing the Catholic cause needed was public trials over alleged plots, whether real

¹⁸Kenyon, p. 59.

¹⁹To the alleged letters of Jesuits Thomas Whitbread (alias White), William Ireland, John Fenwick, and William Blundell, Oates had added one by William Fogarty, Oates's Irish physician. Fogarty was about to be added to the list of plotters and pictured as a manager of the Plot in Ireland.

²⁰Sir Robert Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 456.

²¹Burnet, ii, 153.

of imaginary, nor did he yet know the extent of the genuine information scattered among the Oates fantasies.

Meanwhile, the Danby investigation brought its own dangerous consequences. One was that in questioning Tonge about possible Catholic plotters, Danby inadvertently provided him (and therefore Oates) with some crucial names for Oates's rapidly expanding narrative. Most fatally, Danby dropped the name of Edward Coleman, a Catholic convert of about thirty who had once served as secretary to the Duke of York and later as secretary to the Duchess. Beyond that, the process of investigation itself necessarily widened the circle of people who knew some or all of the story. Danby's servants and agents, though pledged to silence, would not keep their secrets forever. Soon Catholic suspects would be warned of their danger, and rumors would begin to float about London.

By 6 September, when Tonge took the precaution of bringing Oates and his story before Godfrey, the conspiracy story, which seemed virtually dead after the suspected forgeries, was in fact still alive and growing beyond repression. Shortly before that date, sometime in early September,²² Oates had reached the point of no return. The elaborate lies he had constructed to impress a crackpot minister and to vent his spleen against the Jesuits, who had expelled him from St. Omers as a misfit and a homosexual threat to young men, had been taken with deadly seriousness and turned over to the government. They were now being investigated, and if they were proven false, his future was apt to be nasty and brutish, and conceivably short. On the other hand, he had not yet sworn to the truth of his story and thus added perjury to malicious mischief. Since he had disguised his handwriting in the document he had given Tonge, he could still deny authorship of the narrative, perhaps with success. If he was extremely fortunate, he might be able drop out of sight and leave his friend Tonge holding the bag. He still had a chance, in short, to turn back before he was committed forever to his deadly tale.

But if lying was a tangled and dangerous business, it was also a heady one. Perhaps for the first time in what had been a drab, unsuccessful, and sometimes sordid life, Titus Oates found himself taken seriously. A cast-off from the clergy, both Anglican and Catholic, he was about to become the central character in a sweeping national drama. Now on the verge of gaining the attention he had always craved, he had a chance, if he wrote his script plausibly, to crowd peers and bishops off the stage. Impressively too, he had discovered a remarkable talent for lying—not as remarkable, perhaps, as that of Mary Parish, the woman who would soon direct the life of Tom's brother Goodwin, but a massive talent nevertheless.²³ He found also, like a lucky novelist, that his story grew easily. As Tonge raised questions, including those relayed from Danby, and suggested possible suspects, Oates was able to extend and sharpen his tale, and as he reviewed his experiences among the Jesuits, he could dredge up more names and construct more episodes. In the end, he simply could not abandon his sensational fiction and his absorb-

²²Kenyon, p. 60.

²³"If he be a liar," wrote Secretary of State Sir Henry Coventry after hearing Oates testify before the Privy Council, "he is the greatest and adroitest I ever saw..." Coventry to the Duke of Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, iv, 207.

ing new vocation. On 4 September when he agreed to appear before a JP, he irrevocably chose notoriety over caution. He would stick with his story.

Oates had other good reasons for cooperating with Tonge. Besides offering fervent praise and useful suggestions, Tonge could offer immediate subsistence (no small item to an unemployed cleric), and his plan of taking the narrative to Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey offered Oates another layer of insurance against Catholic reprisals. Oates may not have believed his own propaganda—that the Jesuits were cold-blooded killers who would dispatch him without a second thought once they were sure he was bringing deadly charges against them—but he apparently did believe that they or their friends might devise some unpleasant way of shutting his mouth. They might have him beaten up or spirited out of the country. By early September, when his story was beginning to take air, he became uneasy; and he saw that an appearance before the reliable, incorruptible Godfrey offered a measure of safety. It effectually guaranteed that anything untoward that happened to him would be blamed on the Jesuits. As a further precaution, Oates went to stay with Tonge and Kirkby in Vauxhall, away from the usual haunts of his former friends.

When Oates took his narrative to Godfrey, he and Tonge made sure that the story could not be stifled, but they did not convince the government that it was true. In receiving the document, Godfrey did not vouch for its contents; he merely recorded the fact that Oates had sworn to its truthfulness. From the point of view of Charles and Danby the story had not become more credible; it had only become more difficult to contain. The infection had broken out in a new and respectable neighborhood. Their first strategy, when their agents failed to turn up corroborative evidence, was to wait for the episode to gutter out like other wild conspiracy tales. Charles, at Windsor, cut off communications with Tonge and Kirkby, and Danby maintained “a prudent reservedness” on the few occasions he allowed Tonge an audience. For about three weeks, Tonge was reduced to scurrying around to influential but skeptical friends, including Gilbert Burnet²⁴ and Bishop Henry Compton, and trying to prod the government into action.

Meanwhile, Oates continued to expand his narrative, which by 27 September had grown from forty-three to eighty-one paragraphs. In the extended version, Sir George Wakeman “had taken the business into his hand”;²⁵ he had finally agreed, that is, to poison the King. As insurance, the Jesuits had assigned John Keynes, George Conyers,²⁶ and four anonymous Irishmen (in addition to Grove and Pickering) to stab or shoot Charles as opportunity offered. The Jesuits also planned to kill the Duke of Ormonde in Ireland as a prelude to the great insurrection there, and they were assembling a force of 20,000 papists for a rising in London when Charles was dispatched. Naturally they expected to set fires at strategic places about London, as they had done at the time of the Great Fire in 1666 and the Southwark fire of 1676. Somewhat less formidably, they

²⁴Burnet, ii, 147. Tonge, says Burnet, “was a gardener and a chymist, and was full of projects and notions.”

²⁵*HLJ*, xiii, 320. Wakeman was to receive £15,000 when his task was completed.

²⁶Oates described in detail the formidable dagger that Conyers (“a *Benedictine* Monk”) had bought from a cutler in Russell Street.

plotted a rebellion in Scotland involving 8,000 men, and they recruited some Benedictines, Dominicans, and Carmelites to help with their complex schemes.

As matters turned out, Oates's elaborate descriptions of assassination plans proved to be less important than some incidental information he offered about communications and finance. The Jesuits, he said in effect, did a certain amount of spying for the French government; they collected secret information about English affairs and passed it on, via St. Omers, to François La Chaise,²⁷ the Jesuit confessor of Louis XIV. La Chaise (spelled *Leshee* by Oates) in turn sometimes provided the English Jesuits with money; he furnished, for example, most of the £15,000 that was to be given Wakeman when he had poisoned the King. The Jesuits' chief intelligence agent in England, Oates said, was a man named John Smith, who haunted Whitehall and the lobbies of Parliament. Smith was sometimes assisted, Oates added, by "one Coleman," who provided him with "private intelligence."²⁸ Oates did not go on to say that "one Coleman" was Edward Coleman, ex-secretary to the Duke of York, and he clearly did not realize that in naming Coleman and La Chaise (Leshee) in the same paragraph he had said the magic words that would soon validate the Popish Plot to his countrymen. He did add, however, in a later paragraph, that Coleman had been present at a "consult" when Sir George Wakeman had agreed to poison the King.

While Oates was copying and recopying his revelations, Charles finally decided that the Plot story was spread too widely to go away and that it must be officially recognized and squelched. Perhaps influenced by James, he decided to bring Tonge, the letters to Bedingfield, and the Oates narrative before his Privy Council. This he did on 28 September, the third decisive date in the history of the Plot.

In the morning session, the King's strategy seemed to work perfectly. After hearing Charles outline briefly his dealings with Tonge and after seeing the crudely constructed Bedingfield letters, the Council was disposed to regard the assassination plot as a sham; and when Tonge appeared for questioning, he did little to change minds. His reputation as a hysterical anti-Catholic had preceded him,²⁹ and of course he had no first-hand information about assassination plots. Beyond providing an unconvincing one-page summary of Oates's story, he could only complain about the obstruction he had encountered in his attempt to warn the nation of its mortal danger. But while Tonge was being "altogether smiled at"³⁰ by an indulgent Council, he made one crucial point. He could not do justice to Oates's narrative by trying to summarize it, he said, and in any case his own reporting could be nothing more than hearsay. He asked permission, therefore, to bring Oates himself to testify at the afternoon session, and the Council agreed. Charles saw

²⁷For biographical sketches of La Chaise, whose full name is François d'Aix de La Chaise, see *Bio. Univ.*, xxii, 549-51; *NBG*, xxvii, 483-94.

²⁸*HLJ*, xiii, 320.

²⁹Secretary of State Sir Joseph Williamson, who took notes on the Council meeting, explains, in a marvelously patronizing tone, that "All encouragement possible [is] to be given to Mr. Tonge." *CSPD*, xx (1678), 425. The government obviously thought that Tonge should be given every chance to make a fool of himself and no reasonable chance of accusing the Council of trying to stifle the Plot.

³⁰Sir Robert Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 455.

no threat in the arrangement. Apparently satisfied with the way the investigation was proceeding, he assigned Prince Rupert to conduct the afternoon session and then left for the races at Newmarket.

Charles left too soon; he would never again come so close to stifling the Plot. He had reckoned without the fact that his Council had not actually read Oates's narrative and that the members were totally unprepared for the deluge of information it contained. More significantly, he had not suspected that Titus Oates might be a remarkable and intrepid actor. The fact that the Council had not done its homework was not the fault of the members. The day before the meeting, Tonge had provided Danby with a copy of Oates's complete narrative, with its eighty-one handwritten paragraphs, but neither Danby nor Secretary of State Sir Joseph Williamson, to whom Danby entrusted some of the Plot papers "rolled up," attempted to have their top-secret documents copied for their colleagues. They simply brought the manuscripts to the Council meeting and handed them over to the Clerk, Sir Robert Southwell. This meant that the twenty or so members of the Council could only glance through the papers; no one could devote the hour or two that a close study of the Oates narrative requires.³¹

When Oates appeared that afternoon, he gave the performance of his life. Razor sharp from having worked for two months on his story and having just recopied the final version for Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey (whom he had seen again the previous morning), he had every date and name at instant command, and without reference to his papers he could walk the Council through his narrative with cool assurance. After swearing to the truth of his revelations, he proceeded to bombard his audience with facts about the Jesuit organization in England, including its finances,³² and about its connections in France and Spain. He took the Council, in effect, from England to Burgos and Valladolid, back to England, over to St. Omers, and back once more to England. As he went from one Jesuit stronghold to another, he named verifiable names of men who, he said, were conspiring to get rid of Charles. He described assassination plots and projected insurrections in crisp detail, pausing now and then to answer questions or drop another name. The Council could not help being impressed. The sheer intricacy of the testimony was numbing. As Burnet later remarked, the story "consisted of so many particulars, it was thought to be

³¹Sir Joseph Williamson writes, "The papers as put rolled up into my hands yesterday [27 Sept.] at the Foreign Committee to be produced this day were now produced and lodged in the Clerk of the Council's hands." (Williamson's notes, 28 Sept. 1678, *CSPD*, xx, 1678, 425.) Unfortunately, Williamson does not say which papers he was given. Kenyon (p. 67) believes he was given the extended Oates narrative; but Sir Robert Southwell, who received the documents, says that it was Danby who brought in "a bundle of papers importing a conspiracy of the Jesuits" [i.e., the narrative] and that Williamson brought the Bedingfield letters to the Council. Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 455, 456. It is possible that Southwell, writing three hectic days after the event, remembered his documents backwards and that Williamson brought the Oates MS. In any case, it is clear, as Kenyon rightly points out, that the Privy Council had not seen the Oates narrative and that this fact became very important. Southwell himself was at first stunned by the revelations and by Oates's performance. Southwell to Ormonde, 28 Sept. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 454-5.

³²Oates greatly exaggerated, or overestimated, the wealth of the order in England, but he was right about the lawyer, Richard Langhorn, who handled Jesuit finances. He supplied Langhorn's name in his testimony on the following day. Williamson's notes, 29 Sept. 1678, *CSPD*, xx (1678), 433.

above invention.”³³

The climax came when Oates correctly identified the handwriting on the five letters which the Council had taken to be forgeries. Shown only a line or two from each letter and never allowed to see the signatures, “he immediately named whose hands they were,”³⁴ whether Blundell’s, Fenwick’s, Whitbread’s, Ireland’s, or Fogarty’s.³⁵ And he had a simple and obvious explanation for why the letters appeared to be forged. The Council had been misled, he said in effect, by a standard Jesuit trick. In dangerous correspondence, Jesuits disguised their handwriting and wrote crudely to make their letters deniable if they were intercepted. The five letters, he concluded, were genuine.

The imperturbable ease with which Oates explained away what had seemed a damaging error in his case, along with his apparent ability to recognize the handwriting of his former employers, disguised or not, finished what the barrage of facts had started; it crumbled what remained of the Council’s resistance. The balance of belief swung finally and firmly in Oates’s favor, and it would not swing back for many months. Oates had shown beyond doubt that the country was crawling with popish agents; he had given the names and aliases of the most important, along with some addresses. He had not proven beyond all conceivable doubt that the agents were conspiring to kill Charles, but he had made the possibility too chilling to be ignored by a Protestant Privy Council charged with the King’s safety. The Council could take no chances. It issued warrants for the arrest of six alleged assassins, invited Tonge and Oates to stay in the safety of Whitehall, and sent a messenger to the King, asking him to return for a Council meeting next day.

When Charles returned the following afternoon, 29 September, and convoked his Council, the trend of belief was irreversible. Called in for further questioning, Oates stumbled on a few details that in retrospect seemed to cast doubt on his stories. He misdescribed Don John of Austria; he could not explain satisfactorily why he had misspelled the name of La Chaise,³⁶ to whom he said he had delivered letters, or why he did not know the geography of Paris. At the time, however, such incidental missteps were buried under the avalanche of information about popish agents, finance, and plots that Oates poured forth as he took the Council once more through the crucial parts of his narrative.³⁷ In his testimony, he again exculpated the Duke of York, and he agreed that

³³Burnet, ii, 152.

³⁴Williamson’s notes, 28 Sept. 1678, *CSPD*, xx (1678), 427.

³⁵As Kenyon points out (p. 69), Oates’s feat of identification should not have been too difficult for a man who had written all the letters himself. No member of the Council seems to have brought up this possibility.

³⁶Oates was not the only one who had trouble with *La Chaise*; a clerk of the Commons renders it *Le Chese*. *H CJ*, ix, 525. Sir John Reresby spells it *La Shase*. *Memoires*, p. 154.

³⁷Sir Joseph Williamson, who took notes on the Council meeting, does not even mention Oates’s momentary embarrassments (*CSPD*, xx, 1678, 431-33); nor does Sir Robert Southwell mention them in his long letter to the Duke of Ormonde of 1 Oct. 1678. *HMC, Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 455-57. In long retrospect, of course, everyone became marvelously wise and able to see through Oates’s impostures, and one might suppose from reading the accounts of Warner, for example, that Charles made mincemeat out of Oates for the delight of the Privy Council. Actually, Charles did no such thing. He made Oates stumble a time or two, but at the end of the session, he and his Council issued warrants for Jesuit

his evidence against Sir George Wakeman was hearsay, relayed to him by Dr. Fogarty, who had been at the “consult” when Wakeman agreed to poison Charles. On the other hand, he further incriminated Edward Coleman, whom he suddenly promoted from bit player to principal actor. The day before, Oates had told the Council that Coleman corresponded with La Chaise, Louis’ confessor, and that he had received (or was soon to receive) from La Chaise the first five thousand pounds of the fifteen thousand pounds required by Wakeman. Now Oates repeated the charges against Coleman and boldly predicted that “if his papers were well looked into there would appear that which might cost him his neck.”³⁸

This assertion, apparently extemporized, seems uncanny in retrospect,³⁹ since it proved true and changed the history of England. At the time, it was only one assertion among many. Sir Joseph Williamson, who was taking notes on the proceedings, did not even bother to write it down.⁴⁰ The Council had many other worries. Besides ordering the arrest of Coleman and the seizure of his papers, the Council ordered Wakeman to appear next day for questioning, and it issued warrants for the arrest of eight Jesuits, including Whitbread and Keynes, and of John Smith, Oates’s version of a master spy. More generally, the Council decided to “banish” priests and disarm the papists.⁴¹ The Council would secure the King and kingdom first and settle degrees of guilt or innocence later.

Next day (Monday, 30 September) the Council began examining the suspects that government agents, aided by Oates, had managed to arrest.⁴² They also questioned Coleman, who had escaped capture and now appeared voluntarily, and Sir George Wakeman, who had obeyed the Council’s summons. In some respects the sessions resembled a counter-attack on Oates, as suspect after suspect denied the charges against him. But of course no denials could be convincing. Lying is the trade of foreign agents,⁴³ and resolute conspirators can hardly be expected to confess. Sir Robert Southwell, Clerk of the Council, was inclined to think that the accused men protested too much—denying “even that which was trivial and apparently otherwise.”⁴⁴ In any case, beyond firm denials, the Council extracted only a few snippets of information from John Smith, William Ireland, John Fenwick, Dr. William Fogarty, and Thomas Jennison. After the examinations, the unruffled Oates was left in possession of the field, while Ireland, Fenwick, Fogarty, and Jennison were bundled off to Newgate.⁴⁵

suspects and a crucial order for disarming all Papists.

³⁸PRO, PC2/66, fol. 396.

³⁹Kenyon (p. 70) calls the statement “an amazingly lucky shot.”

⁴⁰Williamson notes the testimony about Sir George Wakeman, which immediately preceded the charges against Coleman, but he does not say a word about Coleman. *CSPD*, xx (1678), 431.

⁴¹The order for the disarming of papists was not issued until the next day (30 Sept), but the decision to disarm them was made at the meeting of 29 Sept. Williamson’s notes, *CSPD*, xx (1678), 433.

⁴²John Keynes and George Conyers, two principal villains in the Oates narrative, were never captured.

⁴³Jesuits were believed by Protestants to have a special dispensation from the Pope for lying under oath, as well as a special talent for equivocation. At the time of the Plot, the Jesuit suspects had the further disadvantage of being in the country illegally and hence malefactors by definition.

⁴⁴Sir Robert Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 457.

⁴⁵John Smith, who was not charged with complicity in the assassination plot but only with transmitting government secrets, was allowed to go free. Kenyon conjectures (p. 71 n.) that he had powerful friends.

Sir George Wakeman and Edward Coleman presented special, but not insuperable, problems to Oates.⁴⁶ The fact that Oates recognized neither man was trivial at the time, since he had not yet alleged that he had met either personally; his narrative said that he had learned about them, or dealt with them, through his Jesuit superiors.⁴⁷ Nor was the fact that Wakeman boasted a long record of conspicuous service to the royal family particularly damaging. The most dangerous conspirators, after all, are faithful retainers—men above suspicion. The outraged and aggressive Wakeman finally set the Council's teeth on edge by dwelling upon his own merits rather than stressing his "innocence" of the charges and his "detestation of the matter in question."⁴⁸ For the time being, however, he was allowed to remain free, since Oates did not "improve" upon the hearsay evidence he had offered the day before.

Coleman was also aggressive and scornful. Young and self-important, he had not yet learned that to be too busy and too mouthy is some danger, and he did not dream that by failing to do an efficient job of destroying his papers he had already sentenced himself to the gallows. Where his fellow suspects had denied too much, Coleman denied too little. Proud of his acquaintance with "the great," he freely admitted having met La Chaise, though he denied any correspondence with him; proud too of having handled important confidential documents, he admitted possessing a cipher for encoding letters and decoding letters.⁴⁹ He further admitted that he had recently made an unauthorized journey to Paris. Such border-line admissions meant that although he contemptuously denied any knowledge of assassination plots and protested his innocence more effectively than Wakeman had done, he could not remove all the Council's doubts—especially since Oates, who was perfectly willing to confront the men he accused, repeated his charges and added the direct testimony that he himself had carried to La Chaise letters written by Coleman. In spite of these handicaps, Coleman argued mightily and even won a small concession from the Council. He "made so voluble and fair a defence"⁵⁰ that he was placed in the hands of a messenger (placed, that is, in the custody of a Crown officer) rather than being consigned to Newgate with the other suspects.

By the end of the session, Oates had survived three days of examination and the first wave of counter-attacks. His progress had been astonishing. In less than a month he had moved from a cheap tavern to a palace, defeated the attempt of the King to squelch his story, jailed several Jesuits, and prompted the disarming of Catholics all over England. He had faced without flinching the greatest men in the kingdom, as well as the clerics he was pushing towards Tyburn. He had also invented an excuse for appearing as a double-defector. He had joined the Jesuits, he alleged, as a self-appointed secret agent—to ferret out and expose their diabolical schemes. Always a loyal Protestant, he had pretended

⁴⁶Sir Joseph Williamson did not take notes on the examinations of Wakeman and Coleman. Apparently he did not attend the after-dinner session of the Council, when the two were questioned.

⁴⁷It was only later, after Oates had "improved" his testimony that he had to explain away his failure to recognize the two men.

⁴⁸PRO, PC2/66, fol. 404; BL, Add. MSS, 38015, fol. 283.

⁴⁹He jauntily promised to give the Council his cipher if it had not been seized already with his papers.

⁵⁰PRO, PC 2/66, fol. 404; BL, Add. MSS, 38015, fol. 283.

conversion in order to betray the plans of England's most inveterate enemies.⁵¹ This excuse, which implied false oaths and a handful of similar impieties, was not eminently praiseworthy or plausible;⁵² but it seemed preferable to the admission that he had been a genuine convert to popery and had now become a double turncoat, and it was obviously much preferable to the further admission that he had been dismissed as an English navy chaplain on charges of "unnatural [sexual] practices not to be named"⁵³ and dismissed from a Jesuit seminary as an aggressive homosexual.⁵⁴ There would be time to deny his past if it threatened to catch up with him. Sensational charges could always be dismissed as popish malice.

For the moment, of course, Oates's reasons for leaving the Jesuits were virtually irrelevant. Then as now, defectors were valuable for the accuracy of their information, not for the purity of their motives. Conspiracies and secret organizations are seldom betrayed by saints, and neurotic traitors often tell the truth. The problem for the government, besides catching suspects before they escaped, was to corroborate (or disprove) Oates's allegations; and this process, which involved extracting confessions, seizing incriminating papers, or finding other witnesses, required time and luck. Charles, who had done all he could for the present, left further investigation to a small committee of the Privy Council and set off once more for Newmarket—this time for sixteen days.

When Charles left for the races, he had reason to hope that all might still be well—that the whole uproar might end in nothing more lethal than shipping a few Jesuits out of the kingdom. At the end of the hearings, he was not convinced that the Jesuits intended to kill him, but he was uneasy about them. He had learned, in Southwell's phrase, that they were "not the quiet men he thought," and he was unpleasantly surprised at the number of them in England.⁵⁵ That they were a hopeless political liability was beyond doubt. Now that the Council had begun making arrests and disarming papists, garbled versions of the Plot story were circulating throughout the country. The level of excitement was rising. Any sign of favor for Jesuits or any attempt to stifle a thorough investigation would be dangerous. It was essential, in fact, that before Parliament met, on 21 October, the government should show great zeal in seeking evidence. Otherwise, the Commons would

⁵¹Southwell to Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, iv, 455. While temporarily unemployed (Southwell explains), Oates "had a mind to a dangerous experiment of knowing the intrigues of the Jesuits, . . . so yields up himself as a convert about two years and a half ago, and was to perform the discipline of his novitiate in agency and journeying, for which he seemed by craft under bluntness and an outward simplicity to be well disposed."

⁵²When Oates swore to Burnet that "he had gone among them [the Jesuits] on purpose to betray them," Burnet was disgusted. "This gave me such a character of him," Burnet wrote, "that I could have no regard to anything he said or swore after that." Burnet, ii, 153-54. Later, to make Oates's story more praiseworthy and plausible, and to enhance his own contribution to the unmasking of villainy, Israel Tonge alleged, falsely, that he had sent Oates to spy on the Jesuits—an allegation sometimes taken seriously by writers on the Plot. For the actual relationship between Tonge and Oates before Oates's return from St. Omers, see Kenyon, pp. 45-51.

⁵³Burnet, ii, 148.

⁵⁴Kenyon, pp. 47, 50.

⁵⁵Sir Robert Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 1 Oct. 1678 and 19 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 456, 460.

take over the case. Meanwhile, Charles could hope that no corroborative witnesses would appear and that any papist stupid enough to plot against the government would be bright enough to burn his papers before they were seized. Certainly, the Jesuits had been given adequate warning “of the storm that was coming.”⁵⁶ If no supporting evidence appeared, the sworn statements of Oates would be legally ineffectual. As Charles was later assured by three Chief Justices and eight other Justices, “the testimony of one witness alone, without further evidence, is not sufficient to indict or convict any person for compassing the death of the King.”⁵⁷

The King’s hopes of calming his subjects and preventing hysteria lasted only seventeen days. On 4 October, the Privy Council’s committee on the Plot got around to reading the letters its agents had seized from Edward Coleman; on 12 October, Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey disappeared from his home; and on 17 October Godfrey’s dead body was discovered on Primrose Hill. These events produced a national frenzy and shattered any chance the Crown may have had of managing the consequences of the Oates “revelations.”

That any Coleman letters remained to be discovered was an accident—providential, of course, in the opinion of pious Englishmen. Named in Oates’s testimony of 28 September, a day before the warrant for his arrest was issued, Coleman had been given time to remove dangerous papers, and he had destroyed all his most recent correspondence, his letters of 1677 and 1678. Unfortunately for himself and the Duke of York, he had somehow missed a batch of letters dealing with the previous period. These were seized by agents of the Council on the night of 29 September, and on 4 October the most incriminating were read by the Council’s special investigating committee. The committee members, all good royalists, were horrified by what they found. They ordered that Coleman should be removed at once from the custody of the messenger and committed to Newgate.

Coleman had lied to the Council when he denied having correspondence with François La Chaise. Two of his letters to La Chaise—the first dated September 1675—remained undestroyed, and both were devastating.⁵⁸ In the first Coleman reviewed his dealings with La Chaise’s Jesuit predecessor, Jean Ferrier.⁵⁹ He explained that in 1674 he had attempted, with the help of Ferrier, to get £300,000 from Louis XIV for the purpose of bribing Charles II to dissolve his anti-French and anti-Catholic Parliament. He had

⁵⁶Sir Robert Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 5 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 457. By 5 Oct. Southwell and his clerks had read a great many papers seized from suspects and had found “little or nothing” bearing on the Plot. “But ‘tis as true [Southwell adds] that if anybody had papers of that nature they were early enough upon the guard to put such things out of harm’s way, for they were not ignorant of the storm that was coming.”

⁵⁷*CSPD*, xx (1678), 471.

⁵⁸The second letter, undated, was sent shortly after the first. Both letters, along with a reply from La Chaise dated 23 Oct. 1675, were entered in the Journal of the Commons on 31 Oct. 1678. *HCI*, ix, 525-29. For surviving Coleman letters, including letters to Ferrier and the Papal Nuncio and letters from the Jesuit St. Germain, see Sir George Treby, *A Collection of Letters and other Writings relating to the Horrid Popish Plot: Printed from the Originals in the Hands of George Treby Esq., Chairman of the Committee of Secrecy of the Honourable House of Commons*. Published by Order of that House. London, 1681. See also, HMC, *Fitzherbert*, pp. 49-113.

⁵⁹For a sketch of Ferrier, see *DBF*, xiii, 1122-23.

solicited the money, of course, on behalf of the Duke of York, and he had declared that the interests of James and Louis were “inseparably united.” Louis had expressed esteem for James and agreed that their interests were “one and the same”—an opinion echoed by James, who approved the negotiation.⁶⁰ The project, which at first had Louis’ approval, was halted by the death of Ferrier and the intervention of the Marquis de Ruvigny, Louis’ Huguenot envoy to England, who thought that Charles should be approached directly, not through James, and that if bribery was necessary, the price should be much less than £300,000—opinions backed by Pomponne, the French foreign minister.

Having failed to get the Parliament dissolved, Coleman took comfort in the fact that it had been prorogued until the following April (1675) and that Ruvigny had given him £20,000 to counter anti-French and anti-Catholic measures in the April-June session. He had been reasonably successful in this campaign, and now, in late September, 1675, he asked La Chaise for another £20,000. Such a sum, skillfully applied, he argued, might turn the balance between James and his opponents; it might establish James as the center of power, the “rising sun” before whom all must bow. Such a triumph, Coleman assured La Chaise, would constitute “the greatest blow to the Protestant religion here [in England] that ever it received since its birth.” It would be a vital step in re-establishing Catholicism and removing “heresy and schism.”

Coleman closed his first letter with a peroration on James’s “zeal and piety” and his devotion to the cause of reconverting England. In his second letter, after explaining to La Chaise that he would write secret information in lemon juice, he returned to his theme. In memorable words that would indeed cost him his neck, he declared:

We have here a mighty work upon our hands, no less than the conversion of three kingdoms, and by that perhaps the utter subduing of a pestilent heresy which has domineered over great part of this northern world a long time. There were never such hopes of success since the death of our Queen Mary as now in our days when God has given us a prince who is become (I may say by miracle) zealous of being the author and instrument of so glorious a work.⁶¹

Legally, Coleman’s correspondence presented few problems. Lord Chief Justice Sir Francis North, who attended the Privy Council meeting on 16 October and heard the crucial letters read, pronounced them treasonous “on the spot.”⁶² And when the three Chief Justices and eight other judges were formally requested by the King to decide “whether it be not treason to endeavour to extirpate the religion established in this kingdom and to introduce the Pope’s authority by combination and assistance of foreign powers,” they unanimously answered that “the same is high treason.”⁶³

⁶⁰Coleman to La Chaise, 29 Sept. 1675, *H CJ*, ix (1678), 525.

⁶¹Coleman to La Chaise, undated (c. 1 Oct 1675), *H CJ*, ix, 529.

⁶²Sir Robert Southwell to the Duke of Ormonde, 19 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 460.

⁶³*CSPD*, xx (1678), 471.

But if Coleman's offense was legally simple, the political problems it raised were complex and virulent. If he had been hired by Marvell⁶⁴ or Shaftesbury to blast the Duke of York and defame the King, he could hardly have succeeded better. Throughout his letters Coleman pictured Charles as weak and venal—personally sympathetic to the Catholic cause and to his brother's aspirations but unwilling to venture anything and hopelessly addicted to money. The King's need and love for money, Coleman wrote to the Papal Nuncio, was greater than his fears of Parliament, and if the Duke had money, he could readily buy the King's support for himself and the Catholic cause; "for there is nothing it [money] cannot make him [Charles] do," Coleman explained, "though it were as much to his prejudice as this we endeavour to persuade him to will be to his advantage."⁶⁵ "Logic," Coleman later told La Chaise, "in our court, built upon money, has more powerful charms than any other sort of reasoning."⁶⁶

The King's Council was furious that a lowly secretary had dared to cast such contemptuous reflections upon the King, but the members and the King himself were even more furious at the picture he had given of James. With something akin to panic, they realized that Coleman had shown James to be exactly what his opponents had asserted for years—a popish bigot intent upon overturning the Protestant establishment. James, Coleman told La Chaise, had been

...converted to such a degree of zeal and piety as not to regard anything in the world in comparison of God Almighty's glory, the salvation of his own soul, and the conversion of our poor kingdom, which has a long time been oppressed and miserably harassed by heresy and schism.⁶⁷

To complete the picture, Coleman had shown James conniving with Louis, Protestant Europe's most dangerous enemy, and agreeing that their interests were identical. As Sir Robert Southwell contemplated the effect the Coleman letters would have upon his colleagues in the House of Commons, he predicted sadly:

...it will appear that nothing has for these many years been spoken within those walls that sounded like malice and mutiny that Mr. Coleman, by the letters he wrote and the correspondence he maintained, does not give the utmost provocation for, and this, I fear, to the irreparable damage of his master...⁶⁸

Fortunately for James, while Coleman had been picturing him as zealous and dedicated, he had also pictured him as not stunningly intelligent. Coleman had implied

⁶⁴Marvell had died on 16 Aug. 1678. He was buried 18 Aug. in the church of St. Giles-in-the-Fields, within a stone's throw of Lord Wharton's town house.

⁶⁵Coleman to the Papal Nuncio, 23 Oct. 1674, Sir George Treby, *A Collection of Letters...*, p. 13.

⁶⁶Coleman to La Chaise, 29 Sept. 1675, *H CJ*, ix (1678), 526.

⁶⁷Coleman to La Chaise, 29 Sept. 1675, *H CJ*, ix (1678), 529.

⁶⁸Southwell to Ormonde, 22 Oct. 1678, *HMC*, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 460-61.

throughout the letters that James was incapable of originating anything and that he relied upon truly talented men like Coleman himself to devise strategies and carry on negotiations. As Coleman's Jesuit friend St. Germain had explained to La Chaise, the success of the Duke in promoting Catholic interests had proceeded "by the inspiration of Mr. Coleman."⁶⁹ The fact that Coleman took credit for initiating the Duke's suicidal negotiations with Louis and that he obviously considered himself several degrees brighter than his master—more like James's guardian than his servant—enabled James to disavow, more or less plausibly, some of the sentiments and actions attributed to him. The further fact that Coleman was what a more refined generation would call an egotistical snob, that he undoubtedly held the views he attributed to James, and that he had been formally, if not actually, dismissed from the service of the Duke and Duchess as a political liability helped to soften the blows he had delivered. And the character references that Titus Oates had provided for James and Charles reduced the injuries further.

The damage, nevertheless, was severe. In effect, Coleman had helped Shaftesbury found the Whig party and had originated three bills for excluding James from the throne. He had also given the Crown a vexing problem—how to convict and hang him without incriminating the Duke of York. For parliamentary battles to come, he had placed the government on the defensive and delivered the initiative to its opponents.

More dangerously for the immediate future, the Coleman letters seemed to verify Oates's testimony on the Plot. Oates had been right when he accused Coleman of corresponding with La Chaise—of soliciting money from Jesuits for the subversion of the English government. He had been right about *a* popish plot. The fact that no letters dealing with the murder of Charles were found among Coleman's papers—that there was nothing in the correspondence confirming *the* Plot—scarcely mattered at the time. Coleman had destroyed all his papers from the period covered by Oates's testimony, and it was easy for Englishmen to suppose that the missing letters were more damning than those that remained. It was also easy for pestilent heretics to consider the plot against Protestantism more deadly than the assassination plot (which was, after all, only a component of the general plan). In these circumstances, the Coleman letters and the confused accounts of them that spread through London swelled the reputation of Titus Oates and contributed heavily to the rising tide of hysteria.

On 17 October, the day after the King's return from Newmarket, came the last ingredient necessary for true panic—the dead body of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey. Last seen alive on Saturday afternoon, 12 October, Godfrey was found dead on Thursday evening in a ditch at the foot of Primrose Hill. The body was transfixed with Godfrey's sword, but as the Coroner explained to the Privy Council, "No blood [was] near the place [of the stab wound] nor where the body was, [and] none under the hilt of the sword." It seemed clear, therefore, that Godfrey had died some time before being stabbed. There was a "bruise on the top of the breast just under the collar," the Coroner said, as well as a "circle round his neck like those that are strangled." The fact that the "body did stink" showed that Godfrey had been dead several days, and the fact that on Tuesday evening a

⁶⁹St. Germain to Coleman, 19/29 Jan. 1676, Treby, *A Collection of Letters...*, pp. 30-31.

witness had gone “by that place” to water his horse and wash his hands in a nearby pond and had seen nothing showed that the body had not been there at that time. Again, the fact that Godfrey’s shoes were “extreme clean” seemed to prove that he had not walked into the dirty field where he was found.⁷⁰ The Coroner also noted that “two fields off” there were tracks where a coach had turned out of Paddington road into the corner of a field and then “gone back the same way.” The Coroner did not conclude in so many words that Godfrey had been beaten and strangled, kept somewhere for three or four days, then taken out (perhaps by coach) to the ditch where he was found, and at last run through with his own sword, though these were the inferences that seemed to follow; nor did he add that Godfrey’s money was found in his pocket (a fact which seemed to rule out robbery) or that there were “many drops of white wax-light on his breeches”⁷¹ (a fact which Gilbert Burnet, who viewed the body, thought highly significant). But the Coroner’s evidence, however incomplete, spelled murder (and multiple murderers) to the members of the Privy Council, as it would later to a coroner’s jury. The same evening, 20 October, the Council issued a proclamation offering a reward of £500 “for a discovery of the murderers of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, with a pardon to any of the murderers that shall discover the rest.”⁷²

When news of Godfrey’s strange death swept through London, the citizens had no difficulty in deciding who the murderers were. Here was obviously a text-book case of Jesuit revenge and terror, “a pattern of their way of proceeding,” after the manner explained by Oates and anti-papist literature. Godfrey had accepted Oates’s narrative and guaranteed that its explosive contents could not be suppressed; hence he had been marked for death. And he had been assassinated in a way designed to make other enemies of the Jesuits think twice before they lent themselves to anti-Jesuit investigations. Godfrey’s “impudent murder,” Londoners concluded, had been done “in terror to any that should be active in these inquiries.”⁷³

Later there would be time to worry about such niceties as which papists had perpetrated the killing, where they had kept the body, and why they had been mad enough to commit a murder so sure to bring bloody reprisals.⁷⁴ For the moment the problem was to prevent further assassinations and protect England against the insurrections the Jesuits had planned. It was a time to guard against knives, fires, and explosives—time to call out the militia. Meanwhile, the body of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, now a Protestant martyr, was placed on view where Londoners could see for themselves the horrors of

⁷⁰Sir Joseph Williamson’s notes on Coroner’s report to the Council, 20 Oct. 1678, *CSPD*, xx (1678), 472.

⁷¹Burnet, ii, 156.

⁷²*CSPD*, xx (1678), 472.

⁷³Southwell to Ormonde, 19 Oct. 1678, 26 Oct. 1678, HMC, *Ormonde*, N. S., iv, 460, 463.

⁷⁴The death of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey has never been satisfactorily explained; the case has never been “solved.” The major theories—that it was the work of the papists who were tried and executed for the murder (or some others), that it was the work of clever Protestant provocateurs (perhaps hired by Shaftesbury), that it was suicide elaborately disguised as murder to prevent the Crown from seizing Godfrey’s estate—all have very serious flaws, as does the theory that Godfrey was murdered by the psychotic Earl of Pembroke. Not surprisingly, the best summary of the current state of speculation is that of Kenyon (pp. 264-70).

popish treachery. In the violent wave of panic that followed the murder, the peaceful London of Charles II had suddenly become a city under popish siege, and the words of Titus Oates had suddenly become gospel.

ABBREVIATIONS

1. List of abbreviations commonly used in the citation of book titles and of manuscripts

Add.	Additional
BL	British Library
Corr.	Correspondence
<i>CSPD</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Domestic</i>
<i>CTB</i>	<i>Calendar of Treasury Books</i>
<i>HCJ</i>	<i>Journal of the House of Commons</i>
HEH	Henry E. Huntington Library
<i>HLJ</i>	<i>Journal of the House of Lords</i>
HLRO	House of Lords Record Office
HMC	Historical Manuscript Commission
HS	Harleian Society
<i>IHCJ</i>	<i>Journal of the House of Commons... Ireland</i>
<i>IHLJ</i>	<i>Journal of the House of Lords... Ireland</i>
MS, MSS	Manuscript, manuscripts
NLW	National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
PR	Parish Register
PRO	Public Record Office
RCHM	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments
RO	Record Office
SP	State Papers
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin
<i>VHC</i>	<i>Victoria History of the Counties of England</i>

2. List of Books and Manuscripts cited by Short Titles

<i>Annals</i>	Abel Boyer, <i>The History of the Reign of Queen Anne</i> , Digested into Annals, 11 vols. (London, 1703-13).
Autobiography	The Autobiography of Goodwin Wharton, BL, Add. MSS 20,006-07.
Baxter	Stephen Bartow Baxter, <i>William III and the Defense of European Liberty, 1650-1702</i> (New York, 1966).
<i>Biog. Univ.</i>	<i>Biographie Universelle, Ancienne et Moderne...</i> , 2nd edn., 45 vols. (Paris, 1843-65).
Burnet	Gilbert Burnet, <i>Bishop Burnet's History of His Own Time</i> , ed. Martin Joseph Routh, 2nd edn., 6 vols. (Oxford, 1833).
<i>Calamy Revised</i>	Arnold Gwynne Matthews, <i>Calamy Revised</i> (Oxford, 1934).
Carte	Bodleian Library, Carte MSS.

- CB *Complete Baronetage*, ed. G. E. C.[okayne], 5 vols. (Exeter, 1900-6).
- Clark Sir George Norman Clark, *The Later Stuarts, 1660- 1714*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1955).
- CP *The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain, and the United Kingdom*, ed. G. E. C.[okayne], rev. ed., 12 vols. (London, 1910-59).
- Dalrymple Sir John Dalrymple, *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1771-73).
- Dalton *English Army Lists and Commission Registers, 1661-1714*, ed. Charles Dalton, 6 vols. (London, 1892-1904).
- Danby Andrew Browning, *Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby and Duke of Leeds*, 3 vols. (Glasgow, 1944, 1951).
- DBF *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française*, eds. J. Balteau, M. Barroux, M. Prévost, et al. (Paris, 1929-).
- DNB *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- E. R. Wharton Edward Ross Wharton, *The Whartons of Wharton Hall* (Oxford, 1898).
- Evelyn *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1955).
- Goodwin Wharton J. Kent Clark, *Goodwin Wharton* (Oxford, 1984; repr., London, 1989).
- Grey, *Debates* Anchitell Grey, *Debates of the House of Commons from the Year 1667 to the Year 1694*, 10 vols. (London, 1763).
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- Holmes Geoffrey Shorter Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (rev. ed. London, Ronceverte, 1987).
- Japikse *Correspondentie van Willem III en van Hans Willem Bentinck*, ed. Nicolaas Japikse, 5 vols. ('S-Gravenhage, 1927-37).
- Kemeys-Tynte NLW, Aberystwyth, Wales, Kemeys-Tynte MSS.
- Kennett White Kennett, *A Complete History of England*, 3 vols. (London, 1706).
- Kenyon John Philipps Kenyon, *The Popish Plot* (London, New York, 1972).
- Langley Thomas Langley, *The History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough* (London, 1797).
- Lonsdale Cumbria RO, Carlisle, Lonsdale MSS.
- Luttrell Narcissus Luttrell, *A Brief Historical Relation of State Affairs from September 1678 to April 1714*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1857).
- Macaulay Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1st Baron Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, ed. Sir Charles Harding Firth, 6 vols. (London, 1913-15).

Macky	John Macky, <i>Memoirs of the Secret Services of John Macky, Esq.</i> (London, 1733).
Marlborough-Godolphin	<i>The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence</i> , ed. Henry L. Snyder, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1975).
<i>Memoirs</i>	<i>Memoirs of the Life of the Most Noble Thomas, Late Marquess of Wharton</i> (London, 1715).
Mignet	François August Marie Alexis Mignet, <i>Négociations Relatives á la Succession d'Espagne sous Louis XIV</i> , 4 vols. (Paris, 1835-42).
NBG	<i>Nouvelle Biographie Générale...</i> , 46 vols. (Paris, 1855-67).
Ogg	David Ogg, <i>England in the Reign of Charles II</i> , 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1955).
<i>Old Cause</i>	John Carswell, <i>The Old Cause</i> (London, 1954).
<i>Parl. Diary</i>	<i>The Parliamentary Diary of Narcissus Luttrell, 1691-1693</i> , ed. Henry Horwitz (Oxford, 1972).
<i>Parl. Hist.</i>	<i>The Parliamentary History of England</i> , ed. William Cobbett, 36 vols. (London, 1806-20).
POAS	<i>Poems on Affairs of State, Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714</i> , gen. ed., George de F. Lord, 7 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1963-75).
<i>Pol. State</i>	Abel Boyer, <i>The Political State of Great Britain</i> 60 vols. (London, 1712-40).
Rawlinson	Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MSS.
<i>Sacheverell</i>	Geoffrey Shorter Holmes, <i>The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell</i> (London, 1973).
<i>Shaftesbury</i>	Kenneth Harold Dobson Haley, <i>The First Earl of Shaftesbury</i> (Oxford, 1968).
Speck	William Arthur Speck, <i>Tory and Whig, the Struggle in the Constituencies, 1701-1715</i> (London, New York, 1970).
<i>State Trials</i>	<i>A Complete Collection of State Trials</i> , ed. T. B. Howell, 21 vols. (London, 1811-26).
<i>Surv. London</i>	Greater London Council, <i>Survey of London</i> , vol. i- (London, 1900-).
Trevelyan	George Macaulay Trevelyan, <i>England Under Queen Anne</i> , 3 vols. (London, 1930-34).
Verney Corr.	Bucks. RO, microfilm collection of Verney family letters in Claydon House.
Wharton	Bodleian Library, Wharton MSS.